



# 8 TECHNIQUES EVERY PARENT WITH AN ANXIOUS CHILD SHOULD TRY



**A Workbook for Parents with Anxious Children**

**Chief Storyteller: Renee Jain**

# **8 Techniques Every Parent with an Anxious Child Should Try**

**A Short Workbook for Parents**

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## 8 Techniques Every Parent with an Anxious Child Should Try

As all the kids line up to go to school, your son, Timmy, turns to you and says, "I don't want to take the bus. My stomach hurts. Please don't make me go." You cringe and think, *Here we go again*. What should be a simple morning routine explodes into a daunting challenge.

You look at Timmy and see genuine terror. You want to comfort him. You want to ease the excessive worry that's become part and parcel of his everyday life. First, you try logic. "Timmy, we walk an extra four blocks to catch this bus because this driver has an accident-free driving record!" He doesn't budge.

You provide reassurance. "I promise you'll be OK. Timmy, look at me... you trust me, right?" Timmy nods. A few seconds later he whispers, "Please don't make me go."

You resort to anger: "Timothy Christopher, you will get on this bus *RIGHT NOW*, or there will be serious consequences. No iPad for one week!" He looks at you as if you're making him walk the plank. He climbs onto the bus, defeated. You feel terrible.

If any of this sounds familiar, know you are not alone. Most parents would move mountains to ease their child's pain. Parents of kids with anxiety would move planets and stars as well. It hurts to watch your child worry over situations that, frankly, don't seem that scary. Here's the thing: To your child's mind, these situations are genuinely threatening. And even perceived threats can create a real nervous system response. We call this response *anxiety* and I know it well.

I'd spent the better part of my childhood covering up a persistent, overwhelming feeling of worry until, finally, in my early twenties, I decided to seek out a solution. What I've learned over the last two decades is that many people suffer from debilitating worry. In fact, 40 million American adults, as well as 1 in 8 children, suffer from anxiety. Many kids miss school, social activities and a good night's rest just from the worried thoughts in their head. Many parents suffer from frustration and a feeling of helplessness when they witness their child in this state day in, day out.

What I also learned is that while there is no one-size-fits-all solution for anxiety, there are a plethora of great research-based techniques that can help manage it—many of which are simple to learn. WAIT! Why didn't my parents know about this? Why didn't I know about it? Why don't they teach these skills in school?

I wish I could go back in time and teach the younger version of myself how to cope, but of course, that's not possible. What is possible is to try to reach as many kids and parents as possible with these coping skills. What is possible is to teach kids how to go beyond just surviving to really finding meaning, purpose and happiness in their lives. To this end, I created an anxiety relief program for kids called [GoZen!](#) Here are 8 ideas straight from [GoZen!](#) that parents of anxious children can try right away!



## Stop Reassuring Your Child



Your child worries. You know there is nothing to worry about, so you say, "Trust me. There's nothing to worry about." Done and done, right? We all wish it were that simple. Why does your reassurance fall on deaf ears? It's actually not the ears causing the issue. Your anxious child desperately wants to listen to you, but the brain won't let it happen. During periods of anxiety, there is a rapid dump of chemicals and mental transitions executed in your body for survival. One by-product is that the prefrontal cortex—or more logical part of the brain—gets put on hold while the more automated emotional brain takes over. In other words, it is really hard for your child to think clearly, use logic or even remember how to complete basic tasks. What should you do instead of trying to rationalize

the worry away?

Try something I call the ***FEEL method***:

- **Freeze** - pause and take some deep breaths with your child. Deep breathing can help reverse the nervous system response.
- **Empathize** - anxiety is scary. Your child wants to know that you get it.
- **Evaluate** - once your child is calm, it's time to figure out possible solutions.
- **Let Go** - Let go of your guilt; you are an amazing parent giving your child the tools to manage their worry.

**GoPractice!** Think of the last anxious moment your child experienced. Pretend you are going through that experience with them and reacting using the FEEL method. Write down what you would say and how you would react using this method. Feel free to use illustration:

Describe the anxious moment:

Freeze:

Empathize:

Evaluate:

Let Go:



## Highlight Why Worrying is Good



Remember, anxiety is tough enough without a child believing that *Something is wrong with me*. Many kids even develop anxiety about having anxiety. Teach your kids that worrying does, in fact, have a purpose.

When our ancestors were hunting and gathering food there was danger in the environment, and being worried helped them avoid attacks from the saber-toothed cat lurking in the bush. In modern times, we don't have a need to run from predators, but we are left with an evolutionary imprint that protects us: worry.

Worry is a protection mechanism. Worry rings an alarm in our system and helps us survive danger. Teach your kids that worry is perfectly normal, it can help protect us, and *everyone* experiences it from time to time. Sometimes our system sets off false alarms, but this type of worry (anxiety) can be put in check with some simple techniques.

**GoPractice!** Watch [this video](#) with your kids to illustrate how worry can be a protection mechanism.

## Bring Your Child's Worry to Life



As you probably know, ignoring anxiety doesn't help. But bringing worry to life and talking about it like a real person can. Create a worry character for your child. In GoZen we created [Widdle the Worrier](#). Widdle personifies anxiety. Widdle lives in the old brain that is responsible for protecting us when we're in danger. Of course, sometimes Widdle gets a little out of control and when that happens, we have to talk some sense into Widdle. You can use this same idea with a stuffed animal or even role-playing at home.

Personifying worry or creating a character has multiple benefits. It can help demystify this scary

physical response children experience when they worry. It can reactivate the logical brain, and it's a tool your children can use on their own at any time.

**GoPractice!** Get a plush toy that you can identify as the “worrier” inside your child’s brain. Have your child begin speaking to this personification of worry. Each time they experience worry, follow the FEEL method and then begin talking to the worry with logical words.

Journal about your first experience doing this in the space below:



## Teach Your Child to Be a Thought Detective



Remember, worry is the brain's way of protecting us from danger. To make sure we're really paying attention, the mind often exaggerates the object of the worry (e.g., mistaking a stick for a snake). You may have heard that teaching your children to think more positively could calm their worries. But the best remedy for distorted thinking is not positive thinking; it's accurate thinking. Try a method we call the 3Cs:

- **Catch your thoughts:** Imagine every thought you have floats above your head in a bubble (like what you see in comic strips). Now, catch one of the worried thoughts like "No one at school

likes me."

- **Collect evidence:** Next, collect evidence to support or negate this thought. Teach your child not to make judgments about what to worry about based only on feelings. Feelings are not facts. (Supporting evidence: "I had a hard time finding someone to sit with at lunch yesterday." Negating evidence: "Sherry and I do homework together—she's a friend of mine.")
- **Challenge your thoughts:** The best (and most entertaining) way to do this is to teach your children to have a debate within themselves.

**GoPractice!** Think of one time your child was worrying this last week. Okay, once you have that experience in mind, see if you can step into your child's shoes and complete this exercise as if you were them. The benefit of doing the exercise from the perspective of your child is that you will be better able to teach them the 3cs later.

Write down the experience:

**GoCatch:**

What was the worried thought?

**GoCollect:**

What evidence supports this thought?

What evidence negates this thought?

**GoChallenge:**

Think of yourself in a debate setting. Now, write down a few sentences supporting the original thought.

Finally, write down a few sentences negating the original thought. (You are taking the evidence from above and writing it out into full sentence structure.) As a bonus, get up and actually play both sides of the debate.



## Allow Them to Worry



As you know, telling your children not to worry won't prevent them from doing so. If your children could simply shove their feelings away, they would. But allowing your children to worry openly, in limited doses, can be helpful. Create a daily ritual called "Worry Time" that lasts 10 to 15 minutes. During this ritual encourage your children to release all their worries in writing. During worry time there are no rules on what constitutes a valid worry—anything goes. When the time is up, close the box and say good-bye to the worries for the day.

**GoPractice!** Create a worry box. Make this a fun exercise by using magazine cut outs and items you

can glue onto the box that represent “worry”. Remember, a little bit of humor and silliness goes a long way to relieve excessive worrying. During worry time, allow 10-15 minutes for your child to write down worries and slip them in the box. End worry time with a note of gratitude.

## Help Them Go from What If to What Is



You may not know this, but humans are capable of time travel. In fact, mentally we spend a lot of time in the future. For someone experiencing anxiety, this type of mental time travel can exacerbate the worry. A typical time traveler asks what-if questions: "What if I can't open my locker and I miss class?" "What if Suzy doesn't talk to me today?"

[Research](#) shows that coming back to the present can help alleviate this tendency. One effective method of doing this is to practice mindfulness exercises. Mindfulness brings a child from what if to what is. To do this, help your child simply focus on their breath for a few minutes.

**GoPractice!** Teach your child to breathe like a bee!

Read this to your child: Cover your ears with your thumbs and your eyes with your fingers. Keep your lips closed and teeth slightly apart inside your mouth. Inhale deeply through your nose (1-2-3-4). When you inhale, think about closing your throat just slightly so you can actually hear your breath. Exhale slowly through your mouth (1-2-3-4) while making a low humming sound. Do it again!

## Avoid Avoiding Everything that Causes Anxiety



Do your children want to avoid social events, dogs, school, planes or basically any situation that causes anxiety? As a parent, do you help them do so? Of course! This is natural. The flight part of the flight-fight-freeze response urges your children to escape the threatening situation. Unfortunately, in the long run, avoidance makes anxiety worse.

So what's the alternative? Try a method we call laddering. Kids who are able to manage their worry break it down into manageable chunks. Laddering uses this chunking concept and gradual exposure to reach a goal.

Let's say your child is afraid of sitting on the swings in the park. Instead of avoiding this activity, create mini-goals to get closer to the bigger goal (e.g., go to the edge of the park, then walk into the park, go to the swings, and, finally, get on a swing). You can use each step until the exposure becomes too easy; that's when you know it's time to move to the next rung on the ladder.

**GoPractice!** Set up a ladder.

What is the first mini-goal:

What is the second mini-goal:

What is the third mini-goal:

What is the fourth mini-goal:

What is the big goal?

As a bonus, illustrate the ladder. Remember, the big goal goes on the top rung.



## Practice Self-Compassion



Watching your child suffer from anxiety can be painful, frustrating, and confusing. There is not one parent that hasn't wondered at one time or another if they are the cause of their child's anxiety. Here's the thing, research shows that anxiety is often the result of multiple factors (i.e., genes, brain physiology, temperament, environmental factors, past traumatic events, etc.). Please keep in mind, you did not cause your child's anxiety, but you can help them overcome it.

Toward the goal of a healthier life for the whole family, practice self-compassion. Remember, you're not alone, and you're not to blame. It's time to let go of debilitating self-criticism and forgive yourself.

Love yourself. You are your child's champion.

**GoPractice!** Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of your best friend.

Dear {your name},

I need you to remember you are an amazing person. I think you've forgotten everything you do for others, especially your children. Let me remind you...

## A Letter From the Author

To the moms and dads out there reading this book:

I just wanted to say a heartfelt **THANK YOU** for reading this material. As a child growing up with anxiety, I know my parents sought out resources such as this to help me. There were some good books, but it was hard for my parents to translate all the techniques and material to me in a way that I understood (and, frankly, that would engage me). I decided, when I grew up, I would work to create some resources for children that helped them relieve their stress and worry in a fun way. That is what the GoZen! Anxiety Relief Program for Children is all about. Your kids learn research-based coping skills through engaging animations. You can learn all about it here – [www.gozen.com](http://www.gozen.com).

If you have any questions or just want to reach out, I'm a real person and I work hard to respond to each and every person that contacts me. You can email me directly at [renee@gozen.com](mailto:renee@gozen.com).

I look forward to getting to know you better.

To your child's happiness,

Renee Jain

Chief Storyteller

[www.gozen.com](http://www.gozen.com)

[www.gostrengths.com](http://www.gostrengths.com)

Check out the full program at [www.GoZen.com!](http://www.GoZen.com!)



GoZen! Provides fully animated anxiety relief programs for children ages 6-15ish. But, honestly, the program is used by humanoids of all ages.

Check it out here: [www.gozen.com](http://www.gozen.com)

### About the Author: Chief Storyteller

Renee Jain is an award-winning entrepreneur, best-selling author, speaker, certified life coach and creator of the brands [www.gostrengths.com](http://www.gostrengths.com) and [www.gozen.com](http://www.gozen.com). Renee is also one of less than 350 people in the world to earn her Master's degree in Positive Psychology—the scientific study of optimal human functioning—from the University of Pennsylvania. A gifted life coach, she has coached over 5,000 clients in the science of resilience.

### The GO brand is focused on establishing a four-fold mission:

- To engage and unite a community of humanoids interested in the science of well-being
- To provide programs which tap into and unleash the natural strengths within every youthling
- To arm youthlings with the skill set to mitigate youth depression and anxiety
- To deliver affordable technology which make these pursuits accessible to anyone

### The team:

The [GoZen!](http://www.gozen.com) and [GoStrengths!](http://www.gostrengths.com) programs have been developed by a dedicated team of mental health practitioners, animators, and professional storytellers. The organization thrives on passionate team members who continually innovate methods to deliver cutting-edge scientific principles to kids in a way which piques their engagement and capacity to learn.